

Humanities Institute
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Ivan's Childhood 1962

Andrei Tarkovsky

OVERVIEW

Ingmar Bergman said that "Tarkovsky for me is the greatest [of us all], the one who invented a new language, true to the nature of film, as it captures life as a reflection, life as a dream." Such a tribute, from a master of the inner character of life in the mid twentieth century, can make us see how important was the gradual discovery, on the western side of the Iron Curtain, of the long barely distributed products of the Soviet film industry.

Khrushchev's thaw is the name of the movement in Soviet Communism which eventually mitigated the rigors of Stalin's ruthless cult of power. Stalin dies in 1953, breaking what Khrushchev called the 'cult of personality,' and, though leaving the Communist party to fight it out over future directions, is himself vilified and marginalized from the time of Khrushchev's ascendancy. Khrushchev introduces an extensive political, artistic, and educational rapprochement with the West, the **thaw** (1950-70) that heralded the eventual—with the Fall of Wall--mutual rediscovery of West and East. Khrushchev's thaw, which reached its epic expression in Khrushchev's visit to President Dwight Eisenhower, and to the United Nation in 1959, was to trickle down through many layers of western culture.

Consequences. The present author, like other American academics and writers, spent considerable time in the Soviet zone in the late sixties, working with Writers Unions on projects in translation, and artistic collaboration. It was a time, not surprisingly, when classic American writers, like Hemingway, began to be voluminously published and sold in the Soviet zones. The thaw, in other words, was what made it possible for Bergman—and other leading western film directors-- to know the work of Tarkovsky, and, eventually for Tarkovsky, toward the end of his life, to travel and produce films in Europe, and in fact to end his life in Paris.

Perspective. Viewed from the individual standpoint, Tarkovsky (1932-1986) was simply a small piece of history unfolding, in a small corner of the Soviet Union. He was raised in Yurevets, near Moscow, where he was a popular kid in school, getting over the absence of his father, who left the family, only to join the war in 1941. (It is worth noting that among Tarkovsky's ancestors were a number of aristocrats, a dangerous pedigree during the Soviet period. On and off, throughout his developing career, this pedigree became a developmental obstacle for Tarkovsky.)

Displacement. Avoiding that war, along with his mother and sister, Tarkovsky moved to Moscow, where he was a fellow schoolmate of the poet Andrei Voznesensky, and where his Mom worked as a proof reader. During the most dangerous period of fighting, though, the mother once again returned with her family, to Yurevets, where there was relative security but little to nourish the mind. Tarkovsky suffered ill health, put in almost a year in a hospital which treated him for tuberculosis, and made some efforts to excel in art and piano. Still in his teens, however, he had clearly not yet found his vocation—by this point he was becoming a school boy troublemaker. He began a search for a life vocation. The film *Mirror* (1975) is a detailed indication of the nature and environment of Tarkovsky's life in his early and preteen years.

Search. Tarkovsky put in a year at the Russian Oriental Institute pursuing his study of Arabic, at which he had acquired considerable fluency, but which did not adequately reflect his skills. He subsequently signed up for a one year research assignment with the Federal Government's Academy of Science Institute for Non-Ferrous Metals and Gold. The job involved surveying for precious metals, and it kept Andrei away from home and out in the open, and for 'some reason,' without suggesting itself as a career, it turned a key in Tarkovsky's mind, and gave him a sense of what he wanted to do, make films. (Was it

simply the exposure to deurbanized nature, which will prove to be a driving force in all Tarkovsky's films?)

Cinematography. In 1954 Tarkovsky applied to matriculate at the State Institute of Cinematography. By this stage in Soviet history, just into the thaw, more films were being made by younger Soviet directors, and in addition many more western films—Fellini, Antonioni, the whole new wave in France—and western directors were getting known in Russia. It was a propitious moment for Tarkovsky to initiate his own career as a film producer. Fortunately for him he fell under the attention of the Director Mikhail Romm, who was to become his mentor—as, in succession, were several other leading figures in the Russian film industry. And his work was well placed to interact with upcoming Soviet cinema successes of the late fifties and early sixties, like *The Ballad of a Soldier*, and *The Cranes are Flying*.

Ivan. The first independent film Tarkovsky put out—though let's remember that he, like say Bergman, was prolific in film scripts, diaries, fictional texts, so that his film studio work was only part of his opus—this film was *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) followed by a smallish number of much appreciated films—*Anton Rublev* (1969), *Mirror* (begun in 1967), *Stalker* (1971), *Solaris* (1972), *Nostalghia* (1981), *The Sacrifice* (1984). *Ivan's Childhood* was a great success, attracting international attention, both for special directorial trademarks of Tarkovsky, his commitment to what got called at the time 'slow cinema,' long takes with leisurely exploratory trips across the targeted object or scene, an addiction to 'spiritual, metaphysical themes,'—one thinks of Bergman—and a sparse dramatic structure, which goes to and concentrates on its point.

Reception. *Ivan's Childhood* was noteworthy for its *hatred of war*, a theme which had been unacceptable in Stalin's regime, and which with the opening of the **thaw** became acceptable—if not to all in the Soviet Union. (Tarkovsky attacked the issue of war at the point where that traditional behavior is 'what contrasts most with itself...childhood.') The intrusion of this newcomer film, onto the international scene, brought prizes and awards to Tarkovsky. This first film won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival (1962), and in the same year the Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival.

Story

Setting *Ivan's Childhood* opens on scenes of stark landscape, trees bare, black, sparse and stark against mountain ridges, with closer up shots of marsh, swamp, dead stumps: a stark windmill speaks of a culture gone, human activities that must once have dominated this scene. Don't you think of a used up excavation pit landscape, which has been mined out of existence, like a scene the *auteur* may have interiorized in his experience with the Federal Geological Survey.

Capture The shots are gray and grainy. A young boy is running across the landscape, in flight. He is caught, as he makes his way across the swamp; his captor, Lt. Galtsev, of the Russian Army, interrogates the youngster but gets no where—the barest military ID is all the youngster—who at times resembles a grown man—will offer up. He gives his ID # and nothing more, unsmilingly and exhaustedly demanding to talk to a certain Colonel and to no one else. Galtsev is perplexed, having no doubt the child is Russian, but puzzled at how the kid crossed a swamp and a threatening lake, to join this contingent of the Russian army. The Colonel, meanwhile, has confirmed that he has been working with the boy, who should be treated well and fed—he is—and to hold on until the Colonel's arrival.

Vengeance. As it turns out, we learn that the boy's mother and sister have been killed by the Nazis, the boy is passionate for vengeance, and that the boy will hardly be stopped by the plan to send him behind lines to a military boarding school. In subsequent shots we see that this driven and prematurely aged youngster is making his case that he—driven, small, familiar with the territory—is the most suitable person to make his way through the enemy lines and blow up the Nazi encampment on the far side of the river. To make this element of the plot short, the youngster prevails on the same Lt. Galtsev who captured him in the first place. Galtsev and Captain Kholin give in to the boy's demand that he be rowed across the river, to the German encampment. Gunfire explosions are heard at regular intervals, and the boy disappears into the dark of the marshes, armed for incendiary action. We are never more to see Ivan.

Conclusion The conclusion of the actions that have concentrated around Ivan in this film are laid out before us by Lt. Galtsev himself, in Berlin. The war has just ended, the victorious Russians have occupied the eastern sector of Berlin, and Galtsev is going through the German administrative files, when he discovers the documentation that Kholin was killed in action, and that Ivan has been hanged. The final scene of the film shows Ivan running in childhood abandon along a beautiful and peaceful beach, simply playing and have six year old fun with a scampering girl his age. A dead tree centers the beach.

Idyle Tarkovsky writes a plot which is deep and suggestive, to the point, and given to slow takes. When he embroiders, or enhances en route, it is with great care, as one might say is the case with Bergman—who, for example, flashbacks in and out of time in *Wild Strawberries*, but always with an eye to enriching our sense of the Professor's world. Tarkovsky permits himself one plot-embroidering, which has as effect to enlighten our sense of the military life, and perhaps also of those 'good things in life' for which war is so obviously toxic.

Masha While Ivan is living out his driven career toward revenge, the battalion at which Galtsev and Kholov are stationed takes on a military assistant named Masha, the only female in the film—except for Ivan's mother, whom we see twice invading Ivan's dream world, and reminding him of that child world to which, at the age of twelve, he is still very close. Kholov falls for this sultry, daring slice of womanhood, who is a tough and highly self-conscious modern woman. In a flirtation scenario among the stark birch trees, Kholov aggressively pursues a break through into the affections of this sexy but self-protective lady. The first session comes to a draw, and is on hold long enough for Galtsev to make clear that he also would like a piece of the action. Whether any one sees this action is doubtful, for the army dispatches Masha back to a base hospital, where she will be more useful and less dangerous.

THEMES

War Tarkovsky, both in public statements and in the present film, made clear that he hates war, and particularly for the horror it brings to the life of children. (Maiming, evacuations, destruction family continuity, and loss of childhood itself.) During the regime of Stalin military power was prioritized in the Soviet Union, for there was nuclear standoff with the United States, and that satanic enemy was presumed to require Communism's starkest military readiness. Under the Khrushchevian thaw there was some diminution of this pugnacity, at least to the degree we see it in *Ivan's Childhood*.

Childhood Tarkovsky views childhood as an idyllic moment in human life, and abhors the violence wars do to the natural growth of the young person. In Ivan Tarkovsky stresses the deformation of a child's character, that can result from war, contorting Ivan's boyish face into that of an old man, under the initial interrogation of Lt. Galtsev.

Sex Sex, or romance, play a very small role in this film devoted to the a young male's life in an almost entirely male environment. The great mother, Ivan's mom whom we hear of and see a couple of times, is a stable beaming presence. Then there is Masha, a ray of light in the small canteen room of the military headquarters, the gloomy all male environment with its single gramophone. Masha's presence there is transformative, too much so. Both Galtsev and Kholov seems highly alert to her—and trouble lies that way.

Courage Is Ivan courageous or just reckless in his drive to avenge his mother and sister? The young man feels total scorn for the life of books and mind-discipline he would have had at the military school behind the lines. He is all about vengeance, but with such fervor that he is virtually beyond courage and into obsession

CHARACTERS

Ivan. Ivan is the twelve year old boy who is the central figure in Tarkovsky's film. He is fighting as a volunteer guerilla fighter with the Russian army, as they try to repel the German troops. His driving force is to avenge his mother and sister, who have been killed by the Nazis

Galtsev. Galtsev is a lieutenant in the Russian army. It is he who initially captured Ivan, before learning that the boy is fighting for the Russian underground.

Masha. Masha is a military assistant who has been assigned to the camp at which Galtsev and Kholov have been assigned. Both men fall for her, and by the end of the film she has been transferred to a military hospital.

Kholov. The captain, in the regiment to which Lt. Galtsev is assigned. A player through to the end, when he helps paddle Ivan through the darkness of the river. An aggressive amorist, he puts the make on Masha.

IVAN

Character The main character is Ivan, who is both under study here—an object of analysis for Tarkovsky—and a figure in a situation, dealing with his own challenges and needs, mostly in high pressure situations. Ivan has lost his mother and sister to the Nazi invaders, and is determined to take revenge for this violent act. He refuses the life-solution proposed by the Russian military, who want to send him to a military school. Ivan rebels, makes his way back to the front, and finally receives permission to serve with a night raiding part behind enemy lines. On this sortie he is captured by the Germans and hanged.

Illustrative moments

Running. Ivan is first seen running through the woods and crossing a dangerous river, on his way to escape the Nazi invaders. The landscape is stark, we are unclear of the context, and we can not easily determine if the runner is a small adult or a child. (It takes us a while to figure this out.) A fraught scene, hard to interpret at the time.

Defiant. Taken by a Russian patrol, delivered to headquarters, the runner is interrogated, will give only his military code #, and refuses to talk, until Lt. Galtsev has explained the situation to his commander, who orders the staff to treat the youngster—he is twelve—kindly.

Arguing His fellow battalion mates attempt to persuade Ivan to return to the military school, behind the lines, to which the Camp Commander has had him sent. Ivan refuses, insisting on his candidacy to infiltrate Nazi lines. He prevails.

Hanged. Ivan sets out with Lt. Galtsev and a few other comrades, to infiltrate a Nazi encampment on the far side of the river. Ivan is caught and hanged, as we learn later from German administrative documents found in Berlin.

GALTSEY

Character Lt. Galtsev. Lt. Galtsev is the Russian military man who captures Ivan, in the first place, and determines that this youngster is a fellow guerilla fighter. Galtsev is careful in interrogating, and sensitive to the puzzling young person.

He will eventually be the one to discover the report of Ivan's hanging.

Illustrative moments

Interrogative. Galtsev is the first to interrogate the running youngster, Ivan, who refuses to provide any information, and is totally defiant. The Lieutenant goes from impatience to toleration to interest in the boy.

Attracted. Galtsev is noticeably attracted to Masha, the military assistant who has joined the local battalion. A sensitive and romantic guy, he discerns a dangerous conflict with Kholov, the regimental captain.

Rower. Galtsev it is who, with Kholov and others, rows Ivan through the night, across the river to the point at which he can blow up the Nazi encampment.

Discoverer. Galtsev is in Berlin with the victorious Russian Armies, at the end of the war. Going through captured Nazi administrative papers, he discovers that Ivan has been hanged. The story of this film ends.